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**Parental Involvement in Urban Schools:
The Case of a Family Resource Center in Hartford**

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“It’s disappointing that less than half of Americans are satisfied with the quality of public education in the nation, but it is not surprising. Our attitudes towards the nation’s schools come principally from the news media, and most of this information is negative. The key for school districts is to communicate successes of students to parents – and to non-parents as well, since they make up about 70% of voting citizens in most communities.”

Gary Gordon
Gallup Poll, Global Practice
Leader for Education, May 2004

Introduction and Significance:

The level of parental involvement within a school is associated with the accessibility of school functions as well as the recruitment methods of the school’s parent-teacher liaison. Having a parent-teacher liaison in a school is essential for increasing parental involvement. If a parent feels comfortable in a school environment and is given multiple opportunities for their participation then it is more likely they will become involved within the school system. In this research the term parent includes birth parents as well as, guardians, grandparents, and whoever else may be taking care of the child in their years as students. Parental involvement in this research will encompass the participation of parents within the school including attendance at PTO meetings, presence at parent teacher meetings, as well as attending school functions. Other forms of parental involvement that will be mentioned include at home activities that are performed in an attempt to create a more educational atmosphere in the home environment, such as encouraging the child to study by modeling the behavior in the parents themselves and actively working with the children.

The barriers preventing parents from becoming involved in their child’s schooling can be caused by a number of issues, but the most prevalent concern of parents’ is their inability to communicate with their child’s teacher in a effective manner so each person

involved is given the chance to express their issues. The results for the “2005 edition of the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships* found the biggest challenge new teachers face and the areas in which they feel least prepared is parent involvement” (Cary, p.11). In seeing that both parents and teachers are worrying about the same communication problems, the educational system needs to develop a form of meeting that will sufficiently help both teachers and parents become more comfortable with their interactions so that the child can share their educational progress with their parent and teacher working together.

The study of the importance of parental involvement in the education of children is a frequently researched topic among sociologists and educational researchers. This common study often provides the reader with the barriers that most often negate the participation of parents within their child’s school, as well as several solutions for these issues that can be implemented within schools where funding is available. What happens to those schools where the parent-teacher aide is the only source of fundraising for this type of recruitment of parents? Researching a family resource center in an urban environment presents an opportunity to provide specific solutions that could actually be implemented within a school that receives little to no funding for these programs. There is a significant amount of studies done on the positive effects of parental involvement in schools, and in recent years the government has begun to put into practice several policies requiring schools to provide specific regulations on parental involvement. The National School Public Relations Association stated in 2006, that

“actively encouraging parental and community involvement has been a part of the national education goals since 1994. The PTA (Parent Teacher Association) introduced national standards for development and evaluation of

parental programs in 1997. The 2001 NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation mandates written parent involvement policies.” (Cary, p.11).

These relatively new instructions are slowly being applied to every school across the country, but these mandates require substantial transformations and oftentimes schools that are having trouble already will have the hardest time putting these changes into practice. The schools that have the most issues with parental involvement are those schools within the urban areas, and in these areas these policies will also be the hardest to apply to their schools because they have constant struggles with every other goal that their school needs to match each year in order to survive. This is why family resource centers and family resource aides are most important in these areas.

At Tate Elementary School in Hartford Connecticut there is a family resource center that has begun to flourish in the past few years since the arrival of a new family resource aide. The purpose of a family resource center within any educational environment is to provide support services for the students at the school as well as for their family members. Family resource centers encourage families to become involved with their child’s education, and help provide a more comfortable atmosphere for parents to become involved because, “many parents have reported that they would be more involved in helping their children at home if teachers communicated more with them or requested their cooperation; these reports indicate that home involvement is an underused educational resource” (Watkins, p.3). Oftentimes parent teacher meetings remain unsuccessful due to overwhelming issues in communication between parents and teachers, so the implementation of family resource centers into schools has dramatically affected the willingness of parents to become involved in their child’s schooling. In this

specific family resource center in Hartford Connecticut, there are programs that have been implemented that succeed and others that have failed. From the perspective of the parents and the teachers what are the methods that have worked in promoting parental participation within this family resource center and what methods have failed, and why?

The methods that involve both the parents' as well as the child's participation develop into the programs that are most successful within this specific family resource center. These programs are perceived as successful by the teachers, administration as well as the parents of students from Tate Elementary, and the change in student behavior signifies the ultimate success of these efforts. The programs that fail are the ones which do not provide child care, are not well advertised, and allow for little to no contributions from the parents.

Review of Literature:

There have been many studies performed on the positive effects of high levels of parental involvement within schools. These studies have shown that student achievement increases when parents have taken more participatory roles in their child's education. In suburban environments, parents have more of an opportunity to get involved with their child's schooling because in many cases the hours that they work are during the same hours that their children are at school. In urban areas, parents are working several different jobs in order to make ends meet, and this does not permit them to attend school functions, not to mention help their child with homework. "Studies have found that rates of remediation, repeating a grade, and suspension and expulsion are much lower when parents monitor the academic performance of their children," (Moore, 2006) and this is definitely shown by the difference in behavioral problems between suburban and urban

schools. It is important to note also that high levels of parental involvement within schools “leads to higher academic achievement, better attendance, and improved behavior at home and school,” (Padgett, 1997). This is significant because parents who feel that they have no time to involve themselves in their child’s school because of their child’s lack of good behavior at home, need to understand that their child is in need of attention at their school where a different form of discipline is put in to place. Schools also need to focus more on providing areas in which parents can become more involved so that the students can have a better chance for higher achievement.

The issue that has caused the lowest levels of parental involvement is the lack of communication between teachers and parents. “‘Communication’ is critical to developing a sense of trust between parents and schools.” (Moore, 2006) and schools need to take the initiative to create a line of communication between themselves and the parents of their students. “Studies advise teachers to establish partnerships with parents and keep them informed [because] parents and teachers who work together have been shown to be less inclined to blame one another for lack of student motivation, poor performance, or misconduct,” (Moore, 2006) and this barrier can be broken down through simple programs that involve both parents and teachers working together. Parents need to feel that they are not being talked down to, which is a feeling that many parents have expressed as to why they do not feel welcome in their child’s school. Schools also have a tendency to simply describe the problems and issues at PTO meetings and this does not allow for parents to have a say in their child’s schooling, “

Once community members are given meaningful involvement, a sense of ownership and pride develops. This leads to new innovations, contributions and support, which leads to success and more success” (Cary, 2006).

Parents that are given more of an opportunity to significantly help their child's school in a manner that gives them a sense of satisfaction, will be more willing to help out in other ways. "It is essential...that communication not be limited to teachers' informing parents. Parents must have the opportunity to respond and ask questions when necessary" (Peressini, 1997), because when parents can offer solutions of their own that may help the school, they feel that their involvement is at a much higher level than if they were just listening to teachers and administrators tell them what was happening at the school. It is important that participation within meetings is promoted to the parents because, "many educators and parents view decision making as the most empowering and productive type of parental involvement. It is also considered the most difficult and challenging type to organize and implement" (Peressini, 1997). If a school is able to find an arena in which parents can offer their solutions to issues, then they have conquered a serious problem that is apparent in many schools.

If there were places within the schools that would offer sanctuary to the parents, where they could express their feelings on their child's education instead of simply being spoken to by administrators, parents would feel more comfortable becoming involved. This leads to the development of family resource centers and the appointment of parent teacher liaisons in many schools. These resource centers and the resource aides provide a comfortable area in which the parents can learn about policies and practices at their child's school and feel more at ease speaking about these issues.

The position of a parent teacher liaison in any school is significant because they are there to create a bridge between the parents and the teachers where there was none in the past. The parent teacher liaison must first,

“identify any barriers that could prevent involvement. Understanding why parents are not more involved will help you figure out how to get them there. Schedules, lack of transportation, and language and cultural differences can keep parents from meetings and school events. Many principals cite flexible hours for school meetings and events, including some weekends” (Padgett, 2006).

By recognizing what the most significant problems causing the lack of parental involvement, the parent teacher liaison can now attempt to solve them. There are major differences in the amount of support each school is able to give to their parent teacher liaison and their programs, and this causes more variations in the levels of parental participation. Often, the most unsupported programs are those in the most impoverished areas, in urban environments. These areas contain the most diverse groups of people, and the wide diversity makes it harder for the school to promote a sense of community, “huge consolidated school districts deal with a population increasingly diverse by language, cultural and ethnic background, economic status and family composition, as a result, links to community disappear” (Cary, 2006). The parent teacher liaison can promote a sense of community by breaking down the language and cultural barriers as well as other social barriers that are apparent at the school.

Methodology:

For this research I have employed ethnographic research methods, by observing within Tate Elementary in the front office where the parent-teacher liaison Ms. Marquez works as well as the various other administrative staff. I observed Ms. Marquez’s office, as well as within the main office and the cafeteria, where I could witness the interactions between Ms. Marquez and parents, parents and teachers, as well as conversations between parents themselves. I also conducted multiple formal interviews, two with administrators, two separate interviews with Ms. Marquez in the beginning of my

research and one at the end, an interview with the social worker, interviews with two teachers, one male and one female, as well as a focus group with five parents. Ms. Marquez coordinated the focus group by asking parents who came to one of the PTO meetings in October if they were willing to participate within this study in a more in depth manner. The various informal conversations I had with other staff members and parents were also of use in my research and I have documented their significance in this project.

In this research I began as an observer without participating. I spent at least two days a week in this school for a couple hours each day throughout the semester. Nearing the end of the study I became more involved in meetings where I would help Ms. Marquez, and ultimately was able to help provide Ms. Marquez help with developing the agenda for the resource center's pre-holiday meeting. This research was completely ethical, each participant knew who I was and my purpose for being there, and whomever I interviewed received a description of my research prior to signing the informed consent form in the event I would be taping the interview. Everyone who participated in my research was extremely willing to help and informative about the subjects that we discussed. By attending a wide variety of group meetings I was able to view the interactions of parents, teachers, students and administrators in many different contexts. This allowed me to analyze the interviews with a new perspective. The field notes I collected were also extremely informative for my study.

When observing Ms. Marquez during her meetings, I focused on the interactions between the parents and try to see how she relates to them. I also focused on the teachers and the parents interact, if the teachers use respect with the parents and vice versa. These

conversations can depict how easily parents are accepted into their child's academic community, because if they are treated negatively they may not want to return, but if it is a positive environment, they will have more of an inclination to return.

The interviews and focus groups that I conducted generated the most crucial data in my research. I conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, the social worker as well as the parent teacher liaison. In these interviews the questions were generally the same, a few examples of questions used for these interviews include: How important is the involvement of parents within their child's education? How strong is your relationship with the parents of the students at Tate Elementary? How can parents become more involved in their child's education? What programs implemented by the family resource center are the most successful in your view, and which programs have failed to work? These questions were important to ask the staff at Tate Elementary because the answers revealed interesting findings on the teachers, administrators, parent teacher liaison, as well as the social worker's perspectives on the success or failure of the family resource center.

The focus group with the parents had different questions about how they became involved within their child's school. Several examples of the questions I inquired of the parents at the focus group include: How did you find out about the resource center at your child's school? How welcoming is the family resource center at Tate Elementary? What were the some of the driving factors in getting involved with the family resource center? How do you feel you have benefited from joining the resource center? And what programs have offered the most assistance and which programs have failed at assisting you in getting involved with your child's education? These questions received a variety

of answers several of which glorified this resource center while others claimed they had to find their own way of getting involved. The results of these interviews formed a new perspective for my research because of the diversity of findings.

Ethnographic Context:

The majority of the research for this project was performed at Tate Elementary in Hartford, Connecticut. There are approximately 500 students in this elementary school, (Strategic School Profile) and the population distribution is 98.2% minority as of the 2004-2005 school year and 68% are students with a non-English speaking home. 71% of the students are eligible for free or reduced price meals at the school cafeteria. There is a wide gap in the percentages of minority students versus the percentages of minority teachers and administrators at Tate Elementary. The percentage of minority staff members was 31% in the 2004-2005 school year, and when compared with the percentage of minority students this disparity might indicate why there are some of the barriers that are discussed later on.

I spent the greater part of my time researching within the main office of Tate Elementary where I was able to find a rush of parents, teachers, students and administration each morning. The main office contained four desks situated in extremely close quarters, The main office lead to the offices of the principal, the assistant principal, the parent teacher liaison, as well as the social worker of Tate Elementary. I also attended several PTO meetings that are now held within the Cafeteria at Tate Elementary because of the drastic growth in parental involvement since the arrival of Ms. Marquez. This room was large enough to hold the meetings because it could hold the parents and the children comfortably.

Analysis and Interpretation:

The purpose of this study is to attempt to uncover several methods which are most effective in bringing parents in to participate in their child's education. Through research within the family resource center at Tate Elementary as well as a review of scholarly journals, I have seen that there are several methods that are effective as well as methods that have failed to work. Ms. Marquez is extremely positive about her program that she has been developing over the past eight years at Tate Elementary, and was more than willing to discuss the accomplishments that her program has made since she started. The problems that she has had are mostly due to funding issues as well as the constant changes in the administration. Other problems that occur are due to the lack of communication between teachers, administration, and parents as well as the students, and these problems in communication lead to "lack of understanding of school policies and procedures [which] fosters misinterpretations and distrust" (Cary, 2006). Parents who do not feel comfortable discussing policies due to their lack of knowledge are not completely at fault if the school has not reached out to help them learn about what is going on in the schools.

Ms. Marquez joined Tate Elementary school 8 years ago, and since then she has been dealing with many issues involving the growth of the family resource center. The lack of funding available within Tate Elementary for this type of program forced Ms. Marquez into "spending the majority of her first three years at Tate Elementary focusing on fundraising and program development"¹. This road block seriously slowed down the progress of Ms. Marquez's original goal she set out to attain when she became the parent-teacher liaison at Tate Elementary, which was "to bring the community of parents and

¹ Preliminary Interview: Ms. Marquez 10.19.06

teachers together in a more comfortable environment that would help each group communicate rather than just talk at each other”². Her preliminary goals for the resource center have not changed despite all that she has achieved since she began 8 years ago. Despite all of the setbacks due to the lack of support from the school itself as well as in recent years the “changes from principal to principal, over and over, has not allowed for specific programs to remain implemented...each principal wants to initiate his or her own new agenda for my meetings and it leads to a lot of confusion!”³ Ms. Marquez has remained positive and steadfast in her plans to create this type of environment for the betterment of the school and the community.

This year alone she has 150 members of the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), that is an average of 50 more parents at the meetings than last year, and with an average of 75 parents last year, the numbers this year are “overwhelming, to say the least.”⁴ This may be the most work Ms. Marquez has had so far at Tate Elementary, but that fact that these programs are bringing in parents and whole families into the school shows the ultimate success of her endeavors. “In the past year the amount of parents attending the PTO meetings has increased by an average of 50 parents per meeting. The average last year was approximately 75 parents, and this year the average is 150! The increase is due to a number of reasons, the parents are talking to each other and seeing that Ms. Marquez is receptive and very understanding.”⁵

Her most successful program she began this year along with the new principal is called “Caught Being Great” where students with behavioral problems at home and in

² Preliminary Interview: Ms. Marquez 10.19.06

³ Preliminary Interview: Ms. Marquez 10.19.06

⁴ Final Interview: Ms. Marquez 12.1.06

⁵ Interview: Ms. Chandler 10.19.06

school are given points every time they are caught doing something that is positive. This is not limited to only students with behavioral problems, but this program was developed as an incentive for these students to alter their behavior. Mrs. Latorre, a fifth grade teacher explains that students who are normally well-mannered and have no specific behavioral problems can win these points “by acting as good role models, or performing the class cleaning duties without being asked or complaining”⁶. The teachers and aides enjoy awarding the students with these points, but they have to remind themselves not to give them out too freely. The students need to realize that they have to work hard for these points.

The Caught Being Great program pushes the parents to get involved because if they see that their child is doing their homework without being asked or doing something out of the ordinary, the parent can inform Ms. Marquez and she will give that student a point. There is a small store that she has started where the students can shop with their points. The store has toys and other various things that the students enjoy, and this, Ms. Marquez describes as her most successful program so far. This solves some issues with getting the parents involved, but it is not solving the gap that some of the parents feel they have between themselves and the teachers. By getting the parents to work with their children closely, Ms. Marquez is able to create a stronger connection between herself and the parents.

Jamal Morris was a student with a few behavioral problems, and his father who was a single parent was not involved in the family resource center. When Mr. Morris came to meet with his teacher Mr. Johnson he began to raise his voice to the teacher. In an interview with Mr. Johnson he explained,

⁶ Interview: Mrs. Latorre 11.10.06

“The parent teacher conferences are supposed to be helpful for everyone involved, but when Mr. Morris started yelling I realized he thought I was the cause for his child’s poor behavior. Many parents will believe their children before they believe the teachers or administration, and this causes definite issues with communication. Parents will come in and immediately put you on the defense, accusing you of treating their child differently than the others, when all you are trying to do is inform the parent of the issues at hand”⁷.

It seems that the teachers see the difficulty in communication in a similar way that the parents see it, because the most frequent interactions are between the parents and their child, and the teachers and the student, the connection is lost. By relying on exactly what the child says at home about their day in class, the parent is losing a little bit of truth and accuracy, and by doing this they are “blindly believing that their children are always telling the truth”⁸.

Mr. Johnson never told anyone about this issue, but I suggested he speak with Ms. Marquez. She has developed a wonderful relationship with the parents of the students by holding multiple meetings each month for various reasons. Her favorite meeting is the “Second Cup of Coffee” which she holds twice a month on Mondays. Many schools use these types of meetings to hand out flyers and talk about issues going on in the school, but Ms. Marquez uses them to socialize. She promotes this friendly atmosphere in her office, making it extremely comfortable for parents, teachers and students to be able to come in and talk to her about anything. One of the parents in the focus group, Mr. Jones claimed that he sees Ms. Marquez as “the most important person at Tate Elementary”⁹. Her role is crucial at the school in order to inform the parents as well as help them become more involved in their child’s education.

⁷ Interview: Mr. Johnson 11.10.06

⁸ Interview: Mr. Johnson 11.10.06

⁹ Focus Group: Mr. Jones: 11.29.06

A success story resulting from the flexibility of the 2nd Cup of Coffee meetings is shown through the experience of Ms. Trina, one of the parents involved in the focus group,

“I found that as my son grew older there was more letters coming home telling me about how I could get involved. Ms. Marquez started by sending letters home about this trip and that meeting but I could never make these things. I saw a letter about the 2nd Cup of Coffee meeting and because I drop my son off in the mornings I could go to this before work. Since then I have become very involved.”¹⁰

When her son first began his education at Tate Elementary, the connection between Ms. Marquez and the parents was not as strong as it is now because of lack of support she received from the school. Over the years she has been able to receive more and more funding and support from the community and this has allowed her to bring the message of community out to the parents of her students.

The areas which the parents and Ms. Marquez found the least participation were when there were “strict times of the meetings and we weren’t allowed to bring our children”¹¹. Ms. Taylor, another parent who became involved within the family resource center, had a difficult time fitting the meetings into her busy schedule at home. She and her husband work two jobs each and had little time to interact with their child’s school. Ms. Marquez got into contact with Ms. Taylor over the phone and provided a home visit when she noticed that Ms. Taylor’s daughter was having behavioral problems at school. The home visit made Ms. Taylor become aware of Ms. Marquez’s ability to empathize with their busy schedules, and she saw that Ms. Marquez wanted to provide a more flexible time schedule for Ms. Taylor and her husband to come in and visit with her on a regular basis. These parents are not available for most of the times when PTO meetings

¹⁰ Focus Group: Ms. Trina: 11.29.06

¹¹ Focus Group: Ms. Taylor 11.29.06

are held, or even during the 2nd Cup of Coffee, but Ms. Marquez allows them to become involved by simply meeting with her at the school, or in their home so that they can become more aware of the issues happening at school.

Conclusion:

Through this research I have concluded that the programs that were the most successful gave the parents a comfortable environment, with a focus on family, flexibility, as well as incorporating the parents' insight within the meetings. The programs that failed to improve parental participation provided little to no encouragement for the parents to speak, as well as no childcare or emphasis on working together. Through the implementation of family resource centers and family resource aide's schools will see higher levels of parental involvement.

At Tate Elementary School, the work of Ms. Marquez became more and more successful as she grew into the position as the parent teacher liaison. When she started she had little support and funding from her school, and over the years was able to gain more funding from the community and a large amount of support from within the school and the community as well. This support allowed her to promote the new methods of parental recruitment that she needed in order to provide more flexible programs for all of the parents at Tate Elementary.

Programs like Caught Being Great and the 2nd Cup of Coffee meetings are important for promoting the kind of participation Ms. Marquez has set out to provide. She also has changed the face of the Parent Teacher Organization meetings that she has been running over the past eight years. With the dramatic increase in numbers, Ms. Marquez was able to show just how transforming her projects have been in recent years. With the current changes in government mandates on education, Tate Elementary will soon

become a much more successful school due to the high levels of parental involvement that are apparently still rising. It will be interesting to see if these changes remain in the upcoming years at Tate Elementary, within the family resource center.

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